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SUBJECT: TEAR GAS USED, BUT PROTESTS OVER ECONOMY STOP
SHORT OF RIOTS

REF: RIGA 29

¶1. SUMMARY: Protesters broke windows at the Lithuanian parliament building and police used tear gas to halt violent protesters, but anti-government demonstrations in Vilnius and other cities in Lithuania on January 16 were largely non-violent and did not deteriorate into the rioting that erupted in neighboring Latvia on January 13. Media reported a few injuries to police and protesters. End summary.

¶2. Trade unions had called the demonstration to oppose austerity measures enacted by the coalition government of Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, which has been in office for only a month. The GOL has raised taxes, cut salaries for some government workers and taken other belt-tightening measures to minimize the effect of the world financial crisis and to address budgetary problems it inherited from the previous government. In addition to the main demonstration, which was to start at the Seimas (parliament) building and involve a march down the main street of Vilnius, organizers had urged people in other Lithuanian cities to hold their own protest actions.

¶3. Media estimated that 7,000 protesters gathered outside the Seimas building where, after a peaceful start, protesters threw snowballs and eggs at the building and at MP Arturas Zuokas, a popular former Vilnius mayor who leads one of the four parties in the governing coalition. Zuokas, who had emerged from the Seimas building to talk with protesters, was excoriated but not hurt. Thrown snowballs or other items broke several windows. When protesters tried to enter the Seimas building, some of the 300 police officers present pushed them back. Police employed tear gas after some protesters threw smoke bombs. One Seimas member also reported a new hole in one window of the Seimas building, which he claimed could only have been caused by a bullet. (Windows with bullet holes from Lithuania's January 1991 standoff with Soviet troops have been carefully preserved at the Seimas building.)

¶4. We observed that the demonstrators at the Seimas appeared to fall into two categories: many were older people who were angrily but peacefully denouncing the government and its actions. On the fringes were young men who, to our eyes, came ready to fight. They began throwing snowballs and eggs, and we saw the first smoke or gas canisters thrown from the area where they were before police responded in kind. The march down Gedimino Prospect, the main street of Vilnius, was peaceful and the violence at the Seimas building occurred after many of the older protesters had left for the march.

¶5. Although police in riot gear were waiting for the demonstrators at the Seimas, the police presence elsewhere in the area was light until the violence ensued, at which point riot police also appeared at nearby intersections.

¶6. Media reports say that in the northern city of Siauliai,

about 30 young men with shaved heads, their faces hidden by scarves and collars, joined a protest of several thousand people at the city government building and urged protesters to throw stones and bricks through the windows. Protesters did throw snowballs, and police repelled a group of demonstrators who tried to enter the building. There were no immediate media reports of problems in other cities.

17. At least several people were arrested in Vilnius, in connection with the violence, but no firm figures are available. As Vilnius moves into the evening rush hour, things appear to have quieted down, although there is speculation that the troublemakers of today's protest may return to the Seimas building after dark. The police, who appear to have been well-prepared today, are bringing in additional forces from outside of Vilnius as a precaution. The Cabinet is meeting in emergency session to discuss the day's events. The prosecutor's office announced they were opening an investigation into whether a betting company had incited people to riot. The company had taken bets on whether today's protest would turn violent.

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